

The governor's first State of the State address will lay out his vision.

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Refineries and workers need to hammer out a contract.

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Section B ★★

Studies: BP spill reduced Gulf life

Marine animals made scarcer by oil, experts say

By Harvey Rice

Oil from the Deepwater Horizon blowout in 2010 may have created a vast zone on the Gulf of Mexico floor where marine life is much sparser than before toxic petroleum settled there, according to studies presented Monday at a Houston conference on the BP oil spill.

Sperm whales are no longer feeding in a vast area of the Gulf of Mexico affected by the oil spill, an indication that there is nothing there to feed on, said Bruce Mate of the Hatfield Marine Science Center at Oregon State University, one of the scientists who conducted the study of 54 sperm whales from 2010 to 2013.

Whales that typically made repeated dives over the area before the oil spill afterward shunned large parts of it and made few dives around its edges as they searched for squid. Those areas are where millions of gallons of oil sank to the seabed, leading researchers to surmise that many organisms have perished over a 1,500 square-mile area.

Mate said he suspects the problem has to do with the food chain at the bottom.

Oil spill continues on B6

Chemical facility cleanup sought

By Matthew Tresaugue

Only a chain-link fence and some leafless trees separate Judy Jones' house in south Houston from an abandoned industrial waste facility. They're hardly enough to stop the noxious fumes that waft from the tanks, drums and sludge that remain more than four years after CES Environmental Services closed.

Frustrated by the pace of the cleanup, Jones and her neighbors are urging the city to purchase the Griggs Road property and to pay for the removal of all existing structures. City officials then can decide an appropriate future use for the site, possibly as a park

Arrest made in blaze at Islamic center

Arson suspect is an area transient with a criminal record, HFD says

By Mike Glenn

A 56-year-old man charged Monday with arson for a fire at an Islamic center last week said he did not intend to damage the building in southeast Houston.

"It was an accident," Darryl Ferguson said Monday night as Houston Fire Department arson investigators led him away.

The blaze erupted

about 5:30 a.m. Friday at the Quba Islamic Institute at 730 FM 1959. It heavily damaged a 3,000-square-foot prefabricated metal building used for storage. There were no reported injuries.

On Monday, HFD arson officers said they identified Ferguson as a possible suspect during their investigation. They said he is a transient who has been staying in the area.

Arson investigators were searching for him near the Islamic center Monday when he rolled up on his bicycle.

"We asked if he wanted to talk to us in our office," said Ruben Hernandez with HFD's arson squad. "Mr. Ferguson made an admission."

Ahsan Zahid, the son of the center's imam, said he hopes the arrest will make their community feel more secure.

"We are happy that a person who would do such a violent crime is off

the street. We are a little bit safer," Zahid said after learning that Ferguson was in custody.

Ferguson has an extensive criminal record with dozens of arrests in Texas. The charges range from burglary and criminal trespassing to drug possession, assault and prostitution.

Investigators would not talk about a possible motive for the fire, including whether it could have been a hate crime aimed at the Muslim community.

"I can't go into that de-

tail," Hernandez said.

Zahid said the center has been targeted by a score of virulently anti-Muslim messages on social media since the fire that generated international attention.

Some of the messages on the center's Facebook page called the fire "a taste of their own medicine," while others questioned why Muslims are even allowed to live in the United States.

A man who claimed to be a member of the Cry-

Islamic continues on B2

WEATHER



James Nielsen / Houston Chronicle

Adding color to a dreary day

A woman tries to keep warm and dry downtown Monday as a cold front moved through the Houston area. The sun is expected to shine again today, although with some clouds, and high temperatures are expected to reach about 50 degrees. Warm weather returns at the end of the week, with highs in the 70s, but scattered rain also is in the picture. Weather on page B6.

Updates — rain or shine

» Get reliable weather reports from Eric "SciGuy" Berger: blog.chron.com/weather

Web glitch creates Montgomery County mystery

By Cindy Horswell

The Montgomery County Sheriff's Office is accustomed to solving mysteries, but Monday it had to solve one involving its own website.

For several hours Monday, Internet users who typed in the website for the sheriff's office — mocosherriff.com — were directed to the site "Rand Henderson for Sheriff."

Henderson is a captain in the sheriff's office who is seeking to succeed Sheriff Tommy Gage, whose term expires at the end of next year.

Reached for comment Monday evening, sheriff's office spokesman Brady Fitzgerald said he didn't know what had happened but plans to investigate.

By the time Fitzgerald clicked on the sheriff's website at 5:30 p.m., it had

"There was no hacking. ... It was just an honest mistake by my external vendor."

Rand Henderson, on why online visitors to Montgomery County Sheriff's Office website were directed to his campaign website

stopped pulling up Henderson's political site.

"I didn't see it, but I have received some media calls about it happening," Fitzgerald said. "I will be contacting our Web designer to get to the bottom of it. This should not have

happened. I don't know if we got hacked or what."

By 7:30 p.m., some searches for the sheriff's office website again were turning up the campaign site.

Shortly afterward, Henderson provided an expla-

nation for why the sheriff's office website had seemed to vanish.

"There was no hacking, no issue with that," he said.

Henderson explained that he was the original webmaster for the sheriff's office back in 2002, when its website was launched, so the domain "mocosherriff.com" was in his name.

As he prepared to put up his campaign website, Sheriff continues on B4

Chemical facility cleanup sought

By Matthew Tresaugue

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Frustrated by the pace of the cleanup, Jones and her neighbors are urging the city to purchase the Griggs Road property and to pay for the removal of all existing structures. City officials then can decide an appropriate future use for the site, possibly as a park or a housing development, the residents say.

"We're in a danger zone," Jones said Monday. "This needs to be cleaned up."

The push comes six months after the federal Environmental Protection Agency began to clean up the property, an effort that involves removing several hazardous chemicals such as cancer-causing benzene and methyl ethyl ketone, a nose- and throat-irritating solvent.

The agency has set aside \$2.5 million in federal and state money for the effort.

Chemical continues on B6

Chemical plant is near houses, 3 schools, church

Chemical from page B1

But neighbors and environmental groups said the cleanup likely will exceed the budget because crews are encountering contaminants they didn't expect to see at the site.

"This is a public health problem in the middle of the city of Houston, and \$2.5 million isn't enough to fix it," said Tiffany Hogue, policy director for the Texas Organizing Project, which has assisted the site's neighbors. "Now the city has to act."

City action urged

Hogue and others said city officials should take greater responsibility for the chemical-laden mess because the site is near houses, three schools and a church — the result of Houston's lack of zoning.

For six years before closing the plant in 2010, CES cleaned truck trailers, recycled oil and packaged waste for transport and disposal. The company's customers included oil refineries and chemical plants along the Houston Ship Channel.

CES shuttered the plant and filed for bankruptcy in 2010

after the city cut off its sewer service amid complaints over odors, explosions and on-the-job deaths. The company's president later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to one year in federal prison for willfully violating worker safety rules and faking documents describing chemical shipments.

Councilman Dwight Boykins, whose district includes the neighborhood and the polluted site, said the city should do more to get it cleaned up. But he stopped short of endorsing city purchase of the property, which is valued at nearly \$2 million.

Instead, Boykins said city officials should apply more pressure on the EPA.

"There are residents in the neighborhood who are suffering, suffering daily," he said. "We need to stop procrastinating."

Councilman Michael Kubosh agreed.

"If this was a fire, the last truck wouldn't leave until the fire was out," he said. "But because this is an odor, a stench, we leave them in the stink."

A city purchase of the site would be difficult at a time when officials project deficits in each



Houston Chronicle file

Neighbors complain of noxious fumes from an abandoned CES Environmental Services plant. The EPA began to clean up the area six months ago, but the cost is expected to exceed the EPA's budget.

of the next four years, driven largely by a spike in the cost of servicing debt, rising payments into three pension funds and a voter-imposed cap on the revenues from property taxes. A projected \$63 million gap must be closed before the new fiscal year begins on July 1. That's significantly more than the annual

budget for all city libraries.

Passing the buck

But the abandoned plant's neighbors can't wait any longer, said Brian Butler, a spokesman for Air Alliance Houston, an environmental group.

"The buck continues to be passed from the city to the state

to the EPA," he said. "We need all of them to come together and get to work. It will take more than what's been done."

Chronicle reporter Mike Morris contributed to this report.

*matthew.tresaugue@chron.com
twitter.com/mtresaugue*